Assessing the Economics Major: A Pragmatic Approach
Byron Gangnes, Associate Professor
Department of Economics
December 2002

Assessment is a tough sell in my department. Econ faculty, like those in units across academe, are faced with a combination of tight resources and ever-rising expectations. By inclination, economists are cognizant of the scarcity of resources in general, as well as skeptical of the benefits of administrative intervention. We want to be left alone to do what we do best—teach and contribute to knowledge. When we applied for a University Assessment Fund Grant in Winter 2001, we were well aware of these concerns. Our goal was to discover a set of assessment tools that department faculty would view as both cost effective and useful for their own internal decision making.

We began by reviewing assessment projects that had been undertaken in Economics departments at other institutions and were pleasantly surprised to find a large number of such programs to draw on. We were able to identify several hallmarks of successful assessment programs, including:

- Successful Assessment Programs tend to start out small without a grandiose plan involving wholesale changes to the existing programs. These programs use a small but effective set of tools to gather data, and then add or subtract the tools, as experience warrants, and as assessment objectives change.

- Successful Assessment Programs do not use tools that are prohibitively costly to implement. Assessment that is too expensive in faculty time, staff time, or budget will not be sustained over the long run. Because data on assessment methods is still scarce, it is important to evaluate the costs and benefits of a range of tools.

- Successful Assessment Programs do not use tools that alienate the faculty. Faculty support is crucial in making the program work. Some departments have used tools (for example, comprehensive objective tests) that were deemed useful by the committee but ended up scrapping them after the faculty rejected them.

- Successful Assessment Programs are not afraid to try various tools and discard the ones that don’t work. The ability to experiment seems to be a key component in programs that work.

With these principles in mind, we worked with the faculty to articulate learning objectives that would have broad Departmental support. Paraphrasing the department’s Strategic Plan, we set out the overarching objective “to provide majors with a high-quality educational experience that enables our graduates, whether as practitioners of economics or as informed citizens, to understand the range of economic challenges facing Hawai‘i, the U.S., and the Asia-Pacific region.”
Consistent with this goal, we identified specific learning outcomes, including that our majors be conversant with fundamental economic concepts necessary for informed discourse, that they master analytical methods and skills appropriate for applied economic analysis in employment settings or for advanced study, that they demonstrate the ability to think critically about economic issues and to apply economic reasoning appropriately, and that they develop expertise needed to effectively communicate results to colleagues and decision-makers. In each case, we identified specific outcomes that would indicate successful attainment of the objective, for example knowledge of the core content of intermediate theory courses and the ability to conduct and document academic research. We also identified very practical goals for department recruitment and placement of our majors. The faculty approved these learning outcomes at a regular faculty meeting.

Over the next eighteen months, we set out to “test drive” a range of assessment instruments that we had identified in our literature review. These included:

1. **Commercial Objective Testing.** We administered the ETS Economics Assessment Exam to a sample of students enrolled in 400-level courses.
2. **Objective Mini-Tests.** Instructors in Intermediate Theory courses included a handful of objective questions in final exams geared to course objectives.
3. **Course-Specific Objectives and Evaluation.** An instructor set course objectives before the semester and included exam questions to test these.
4. **Departmental Review of Students’ Work Product.** We asked two faculty members to review essays collected from two upper-division courses with an eye to the Department's learning objectives.
5. **Surveys.** We developed survey instruments for incoming majors, graduating seniors, and recent graduates to assess satisfaction, usefulness of courses, success in building skills, and career placement.

In each case, the assessment instruments were tried out in a limited way, and we were able to draw conclusions about the likely costs and benefits from large-scale implementation. For example, while nationally normed tests are deemed desirable by some faculty members, others are ambivalent, and the structure and cost of the exams makes ongoing implementation impractical. The use of objective mini-tests is more promising, and the review of work product yielded some surprising insights about our students’ strengths and weaknesses.

At this point, the assessment committee is preparing recommendations for ongoing assessment that we will take to the full faculty early in the spring term. We expect an active debate about the benefits of the various alternatives as well as their costs.

Even before our “permanent” assessment plan is in place, we have begun to draw on the assessment results. For example, information from the draft surveys in use during 2001-2002 suggests that students want more opportunities for active involvement in the program, including more regular information about department news, internships, faculty interaction, and job placement. In response, the Undergraduate Committee has developed a more formal internship program, has established a faculty mentor system, and has resurrected the Economics Club as a support for student interaction and career.
planning. Based in part on student’s expressed interest in a more relevant curriculum, the Department Chair has provided limited release time on a competitive basis for new course development and renovation of existing courses. These actions should provide tangible evidence to department faculty that the assessment program promises benefits that justify investment of their resources.